

# Vicksburg

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Vicksburg National Military Park



## How Did They See Through All Those Trees?



### Battlefield Vistas Then and Now

During the siege of Vicksburg, soldiers in blue and gray had an unobstructed view of the opposing force from any point along the siege and defense lines. But why are there so many trees on the battlefield now?

### “Walnut Hills”



*Stockade Redan, Graveyard Road, late 1930's.*



*Stockade Redan, Graveyard Road, today.*

Before European settlement, the area around Vicksburg was originally covered by tall hardwood forest. The first thing Europeans did was cut down the forest in order to plant crops. With these hilltops under cultivation, they became bare of trees, as did the side slopes gentle enough to allow a man with a mule and plow to walk without falling into a ravine. Houses were always located on ridge tops and roads followed the ridgelines wherever possible. And, from June 1862 on, most available timber was used to construct fortifications along the 8-mile Confederate defense line around Vicksburg. This was the landscape in 1863, and excluding growth in steep ravines, only scattered trees dotted the battlefield.

However, as soon as the protecting trees were removed, the ridgetop fields began to erode away. After some seventy-five years, a substantial proportion of the hilltop farmland had been lost, with most farms in the area abandoned between 1900 and 1920. The sides of the ridges were scarred with fresh gullies and major ravines were filled with silt that stayed wet and boggy - conditions quickly exploited by native cane. These ravine bottoms grew into immense canebrakes, creating almost impenetrable thickets. Slopes between the bottoms and open fields at the top were mostly covered with tangled scrub.



*Hickenlooper statue (Tour Stop 3), 1920's.*



*Hickenlooper statue (Tour Stop 3), today.*



*Mississippi State Memorial,  
November 13, 1909.*



*Mississippi State Memorial, today.*

## Erosion Control



View of Old Jackson Road from observation tower, early 1900's.



Old Jackson Road, today.

By 1933, erosion had become such a serious problem that it threatened the very fabric of the Park. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) established four camps to complete a series of erosion control projects. They installed concrete drains, gutters and planted what is now a dense forest for the sole purpose of controlling water runoff and combating erosion. Sixty years later, we know that course of action was only partially successful. Tree roots can hold soil, but exposed roots only serve to channel water from runoff. As older trees fall over from disease and wind damage, the exposed root systems create new passages for water to flow.

Environmental technologies now enable us to maintain soil stability without trees, using grasses which are resilient and

quick growing. The National Park Service is now conducting vista-clearing projects to restore the historic scene, expose key terrain features and provide access to monuments. On the South Loop, a 10-acre vista-clearing project has exposed over twenty monuments, markers and tablets and given visitors a clear, unobstructed view of opposing lines around Fort Garrott. With this view of the formidable Confederate defenses, it is now easy to understand and appreciate the difficult obstacles faced by the Union army approaching over the steep, hilly landscape.

The accompanying photographs provide a good visualization of the battlefield area as it was then and now.

## CCC Camps In Vicksburg National Military Park

